

# **The Murder of Julian Brandon**

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## **Timeline of Events**

December 27, 2002: On Friday night, Brandy Holmes and Robert Coleman went to a house in the Nob Hill neighborhood to do a home invasion.

December 30, 2002: On Sunday night, Brandy Holmes and Robert Coleman returned to the same home in Nob Hill to do a home invasion.

January 1, 2003: On Wednesday night at 10 pm, Brandy Holmes and Robert Coleman did a home invasion at 5340 Primitive Baptist Church Road. Julian Brandon is murdered. Alice Brandon was shot in the head twice.

January 4, 2003: On Saturday night, Brandy Holmes took Terrance Blaze for a ride in her mother's car. Blaze was found dead the next day.

January 5, 2003: On Sunday at 6 pm, Deputies were called to 5340 Primitive Baptist Church Road. Reverend Julian Brandon was found dead by his front door. Alice Brandon was found in the bedroom alive but severely wounded.

January 6, 2003: During the early morning hours, the body of Terrance Blaze was located on a dirt road. Brandy Holmes was interviewed several times, confessed to being involved in three murders and was arrested. Robert Coleman denied involvement but was arrested for murder. Donny Williams was accused of being involved in two murders and was arrested for an outstanding warrant.

February 2005: Robert Coleman is tried and convicted of first degree murder. He was given the death penalty.

February 2006: Brandy Holmes is tried and convicted of first degree murder. She was given the death penalty.

January 2012: Robert Coleman is granted a new trial. He was found guilty of first degree murder and given the death penalty.

2016: Brandy Holmes and Robert Coleman are taken off of death row. They are currently serving life sentences.

## **Part 1**

### **Beyond the yellow tape.**

*“...there he discovered that if he stared hard at any wolf, the wolf would be forced to drop his eyes, and so he used to stare for fun.”*

—Mowgli in *The Jungle Books* by Rudyard Kipling

It was 6 pm on Sunday night at the beginning of winter solstice, just three days since the new moon. Nighttime came early and the holidays were over. People were getting ready for a full week of work.

Reverend Julian Brandon and his wife Alice lived at 5340 Primitive Baptist Church Road just off of Roy Road in a home they recently built. Julian was a retired minister who returned home to Louisiana. He still served on a limited basis as pastor of senior citizens at First Baptist Church in Blanchard. Retirement had been good to the Brandon's.

People in Blanchard like things quiet, but 2003 was a little too quiet. The last time anyone heard from the Brandon's was New Year's Day, and now, four days later, friends and family were concerned. It was unlike them to miss church on Sunday morning, but when they didn't show up that evening everyone knew something was wrong. Phone calls went unanswered, so someone went to check on them.

They were not the only people concerned about the lack of activity at the Brandon home. Alice's cousin, Danny, arrived at the back door of the house at about the same time the friend approached the front door and reached for the door bell, but before he could punch the button, he looked through the window and saw Julian lying just inside the door in a pool of blood. He hurried back to his vehicle and called the Caddo Parish Sheriff's Office. Meanwhile, Danny walked into the house through the back door.

The third person to show up at the Brandon's that evening was Deputy Mike Vaitkus. He arrived in flashes of red and blue and screams from a siren.

The last two days of 2002 brought rain, but the New Year was dry and pleasant. The high on Sunday was 66 degrees. It was a quiet day for the evening shift, but that ended abruptly as vehicles gathered on Primitive Baptist Church Road. The rest of the night was chaos.

Vaitkus talked to the caller in front of the Brandon's home and then went to the back looking for a way inside. Behind the house, he found a woman standing next to an open door. She told him her husband, Danny Kent, was inside checking on Julian and Alice. She said Danny received a call from his sister-in-law, who lived across the street from the Brandons, and she told him she thought Julian may have had a heart attack and needed help. Julian, known by family as June-bug, was one of Danny's best friends, and Alice was his second cousin.

Danny Kent was no stranger to the Sheriff's Office. He recently retired as a mechanic for the Sheriff's fleet of cars, trucks, SUVs, and boats. He was a no-nonsense man who was devoted to his family. Vaitkus approached him carefully and asked him to step outside.

With Danny out of the way, Vaitkus went inside and found Julian lying in front of the front door in a pool of dried blood just like the caller said. He noticed a deep slash across Julian's neck, and a knife protruding from his back. Julian was clearly dead, and had been for some time. Near his body laid a broken kitchen knife. There were bloody footprints on the wall and floor, and a yellow bracelet conspicuously lying on the floor in the kitchen.

Knowing there was nothing he could do for Julian, Vaitkus backed out of the house and waited for back up. When Sergeant Bill Gaines arrived, they went inside with guns drawn making sure the people who murdered June-bug weren't lurking in a dark corner waiting to ambush someone. Moments later, Richard Jennings set up a perimeter around the outside of the house. From now on only law enforcement or medical personnel would go beyond the yellow tape.

Vaitkus and Gaines didn't find any bad guys, but they did find a woman on the floor in the bedroom. It was Alice Brandon. A trail of blood on the bed led to the floor where she lay. She had been shot in the head, but unlike Julian, she was alive and able to speak. When the paramedics arrived, Bill backed away, knowing that her survival depended on emergency treatment. He wanted to ask her who shot her and killed her husband, but he knew it would have to wait. She was air lifted to LSU Medical Center in Shreveport.

Sheila Hostnick and Kay Ward were the detectives on call. Sheila arrived first. When Kay Ward walked up to the scene, Lieutenant Steve Tompkins, the evening shift patrol commander, raised the yellow perimeter tape for her. As she passed him, Tompkins reminded her that Brandy Holmes lived just down the road.

Brandy Holmes was a notorious neighborhood criminal who was known to steal from and burglarize her neighbors. She spent the last part of 2002 with her father in Mississippi but recently returned home. At 23, she was a convicted felon on probation.

Richard Jennings, the third deputy to arrive at the scene of the murder, dealt with Brandy Holmes a few months earlier. He responded to a call about a little girl being bitten by a dog. He found the dog tied up in front of Brandy's house. He spoke to her mother about letting the dog run loose. She told him her dog was tired of being on the chain all day so she let him run around. While Richard wrote her a summons for Dogs at Large, a girl with a fair complexion approached and tried to talk him out of arresting her mother. The girl was Brandy Holmes. Due to her attitude and appearance, Richard was surprised that she was 23 years old. When she couldn't talk him out of writing the summons to her mother, she took her frustration out on the dog. "Looky what you gone and done now. Dontcha know beeter dan dat?"

When Richard looked up from the summons, she was staring him down as if she could stop him or at least make him reconsider what he was doing. It didn't work, but every time he looked up from his paperwork she was glaring at him.

Lt. Tompkins comment from the perimeter was interesting, especially since the crime had just been reported. At that point, no physical evidence had been collected and no eyewitnesses or suspects identified. It seemed premature to hypothesize on suspects.

The name Brandy Holmes was not new to Kay Ward. In October she worked a burglary at Brandy's next door neighbor's house. Several pieces of jewelry were taken in the burglary, and later those same pieces were found inside Brandy's home. It appeared she committed the burglary, but someone else took responsibility for it.

A week before Julian Brandon was found, another burglary occurred in Brandy's neighborhood. The case was assigned to Kay, and Brandy was the prime suspect. As a convicted felon who had not been out of jail very long, she was a

suspect in every theft and burglary that occurred within a five mile radius of her home, but was it possible that she was a killer?

Danny Kent seemed to think so. One night eight years earlier, Danny let his dog out at 10 pm before bed. When he went outside, the puppy began barking hysterically. Danny noticed the door to his barn was wide open. He went to the barn and found his riding lawn mower and go cart missing. He searched outside and located the mower and go cart parked at his property line at the edge of the woods where someone staged them to pick up later.

He called the Sheriff's Office, and they sent out a tracking dog. According to Danny, the dog followed a trail straight to Brandy's house. The deputies asked him if he wanted to press charges, but he would not. He didn't think it was right to put a girl in jail.

Danny loved his cousin Alice, and he and June-bug were lifelong friends. To a man like him, leaving a woman for dead after shooting her in the head was far worse than killing her outright.

Despite the consensus, it was too early to be rounding up suspects. Deputies waited on the Coroner's Office to pick up Julian's body, and Alice was just arriving at the hospital. CSI had not gone inside the home yet, and it would take them hours to process the scene. A break in the case might come from evidence at the scene, an autopsy, a tip, or a witness.

Julian and Alice did not have an enemy, and they were known for caring for and helping anyone in need. How could something like this happen?

Word of the attack spread through the Blanchard community like wildfire. Residents loaded their guns and locked their doors. They were afraid because there was a killer in their midst. The deputies felt the same way. They knew it was an urgent situation. They knew everything possible must be done to catch the murderer. They sympathized with Alice and her family, but they didn't have time to grieve because they had the burden of solving the case. A murder in a cop's jurisdiction is serious. Priorities change. Shifts are extended. Searches are conducted, and everything possible is done to catch the killer.

Sheila Hostnick briefed Kay Ward on the case. They looked through the house for any obvious clues. Sheila noticed an open jewelry box in the bedroom, and it looked like jewelry was missing from it. There were knives scattered around the house that came from a knife block in the kitchen. The knives were used to slice Julian's throat and stab him all over his body. On the couch in the living room was a VHS tape entitled *The Evil that Men Do*.

Kay and Hostnick left the scene and went to the office to call local hospitals and see if anyone came in needing stitches for a cut, but the only person who went to a hospital with a cut received it in a car crash. Lieutenant Bill Duncan stayed at the scene when the detectives left and the manager of the Blanchard Place Apartments down the road approached him with some information. He called Kay and Sheila and told them to meet him at the apartments. When they arrived, he told them the manager said Brandy Holmes was at the apartments two or three days earlier and told him she killed an, "...old couple that lived by a church in the neighborhood." She showed him a plastic bag full of jewelry and a small caliber pistol as proof. She offered to sell him the jewelry, but he turned her down. The manager thought

Brandy was lying because he did not hear anything on the news to validate her claim.

Brandy had a reputation with people in her neighborhood and the deputies who knew her. She enjoyed intimidating people and doing as she pleased. In Blanchard, the name 'Brandy' and the word 'evil' were synonymous, and that fact was even more amazing since she had only been in the neighborhood off and on since June, 2002, because the three years before that she was in the state penitentiary for burglary. The detectives canvassed the apartment complex and spoke to several people who said Brandy told them about killing an old couple.

Over the next few days, other people came forward and told the Sheriff's Office about Brandy telling them she killed people. It seemed strange that no one came forward until after the Brandons were found. If they would have called the Sheriff's Office sooner, they may have saved a life.

## **Part 2**

### **Bad to the Bone.**

*"Violence isn't always evil. What's evil is the infatuation with violence."*

—Jim Morrison

The case was hours old, and the name on everyone's lips was Brandy. Neighbors knew her to be compulsive and troublesome. Her acquaintances were afraid of her. Patrolmen named her as a person of interest before paramedics left the scene of the murder, and she was the detective's number one suspect. When the murder was made public, no one was surprised that the Sheriff's Office was looking for her.

The detectives had enough information to question her. At the very least they needed to ask her if she ever told anyone she killed an elderly couple.

Brandy's home was within walking distance of the murder. Detectives Hostnick and Ward went to her house that Sunday night and found her, along with her brother, her mother, and her boyfriend, Robert Coleman. Coleman was a 33 year-old man from Mississippi that Brandy met while staying at her father's house during the months before Christmas. The detectives brought all of them to the office for questioning.

Brandy wore a black leather jacket to the interview. Kay Ward recognized the jacket, and found out later it was taken in a burglary a week and a half earlier.

Everyone who lived in the home should have known something about the crime that occurred down the road from them. If Brandy told acquaintances, it was a sure bet she told the people she lived with. If she wasn't involved, how could she know about it before it was reported? It wasn't likely that she would leave her boyfriend home alone while she was wreaking havoc, and the detectives thought her brother was involved. The only one of the four who was not a suspect was her mother.

The general rule for interviewing suspects is to interview the least culpable first. That way the main suspect has no idea what others have told detectives. While the main suspect is waiting to be interviewed, he has plenty of time to think about how he should answer questions. The uncertainty of not knowing how to keep the story straight brings on stress, and stress helps detectives determine when the suspect is being deceptive.

Robert Coleman was interviewed first. He was an unemployed, convicted robber and thief. Robert told the detectives he and Brandy had been together for two months. They met when she moved to Mississippi with her father. In December, he and Brandy came to Shreveport to spend Christmas with her mother. They arrived in Shreveport on Christmas Eve, and Brandy's mom picked them up at the downtown bus station.

Robert's alibi was simple. He told the detectives he got drunk every night, slept every day until 1:30 or 2 pm, and never left Brandy's trailer. When they asked him to give Brandy an alibi, he said he had no idea what Brandy did while he was drunk or asleep. Without coming out and saying it, he blamed Brandy for everything.

Since three newspapers were found in the Brandon's driveway, the detectives estimated the attack occurred on Thursday, January 2. They asked Robert where he was that day, and he said he and Brandy were at home, drinking all day long. He could not remember if anyone else was there. He said Brandy never told him she killed anyone.

Next, Kay and Sheila spoke to Brandy's mother and her brother. When they asked her brother about the attacks, he said he didn't know anything, and Brandy did not tell him anything about it.

Brandy's mom said the same thing, and she gave a sweeping alibi for the whole family. She said everyone in her house was home all week. Her alibi was the same as Coleman's, broad and vague. Kay and Sheila noticed two gold necklaces hanging around her neck. They asked her where they came from, and she told them they were a gift from Brandy. The detectives glanced at each other. Since Brandy was unemployed and a convicted burglar, a gift from her was suspicious.

It was not unusual for Brandy to give her mother expensive gifts. Two months earlier, she gave her mother some jewelry that came from a house she burglarized. Detectives returned it to its rightful owners. Since Brandy was on probation, she talked someone else into taking the burglary charge to keep her from backing up time. For her mother to think Brandy suddenly had the honest means to give her two gold chains was absurd. It was still too early to know if the necklaces came from the Brandon's home, so the detectives seized them. Her mom realized the implication of having the jewelry seized, and she asked for a lawyer, ending the interview.

Brandy's brother claimed he was home when the Brandon's were attacked, and the detectives were able to confirm it. In addition, there was no definitive, physical evidence to put him there; however, Kay and Sheila were confident that Brandy told him what happened on Primitive Baptist Church Road, and he lied to them. The case would have to take a dramatic turn before he would cooperate.

A detective's goal in an interview with a suspect is to get an alibi. If the suspect doesn't give a detailed alibi, it is suspicious, and that alone is enough to cast

doubt on his credibility. So far, Robert Coleman gave a vague, generalized alibi. Nothing he said convinced detectives of his innocence or directed attention away from Brandy.

Evidence and testimony that is favorable to a suspect is called exculpatory evidence. Evidence or testimony that points to a suspect's guilt is called inculpatory evidence. Both exculpatory and inculpatory evidence must be checked out and corroborated before a case goes to trial. If the detective doesn't check everything, the defense attorney will point out his lack of diligence during the trial to discredit him. All information must be taken seriously; however, the urgency of a fresh case demands priority on locating suspects and developing probable cause to put them behind bars. Details can be worked out later. The detectives would soon realize how the pursuit of exculpatory evidence can be a distraction from those priorities.

Conspiracy theorists imagined a dozen scenarios of how Brandy's brother was involved in the heinous crime, but he had an alibi, and it was solid. Even so, the issue would come up later at a crucial time.

Neither Brandy Holmes nor Robert Coleman had such an alibi.

## Part 3

### Girls want to have fun.

"Sometimes"  
*Across the fields of yesterday  
She sometimes comes to me  
A little girl just back from play  
the little girl I used to be  
And yet she smiles so wistfully  
once she has crept within  
I wonder if she hopes to see  
the woman I might have been—  
—by Blanche Barrow 1933*

It was Brandy Holmes turn to be interviewed. By then it was after midnight, and the investigation was 6 hours old.

The detectives had no problem getting Brandy to talk. Talking was who she was. The reason she was a suspect in the first place was because she told half the neighborhood she killed an old couple. The problem was not her refusal to provide information, it was determining which parts of her statement were true and which parts were compulsive lies. With Brandy, the parts that were believable ended up being lies, and the parts that were outrageous ended up being true.

The standard protocol for interview and interrogation is to interview first, then interrogate if necessary. The interview is a fact finding mission, and it is non-confrontational. The goal of the interview is to get a detailed alibi from the suspect.



An interview is not a debate between a detective and the suspect, it is the opportunity for the suspect to give his side of the story.

Once a detective has as much of an alibi as he can get from a suspect, and he has asked all the questions he needs to ask, he should leave the suspect alone. While he is away he should review his notes and answer two basic questions. First, did the suspect give a clear detailed alibi, and second, did the suspect appear to be truthful? If the answer to either of those questions is no, the detective should do an interrogation.

The interrogation is far different than the interview. It is confrontational but controlled. During the interrogation the detective reasons with the suspect. He can apply the unique circumstances of the case to the crime and explain how the suspect was the only person who could have committed it. He tells the suspect why his story doesn't make sense.

Brandy took control of her interview from the beginning, which wasn't surprising, but then she did something unexpected. Instead of giving an alibi, she blamed everything on someone else. She told the detectives she knew she would be blamed for the murder, but she didn't have any firsthand information because what she knew came from someone else. She said her long-time friend Donny Williams (not his real name) called her and told her he broke in the house and killed the people who lived there.

Brandy told the detectives where Donny lived. Kay and Sheila left Brandy with Lieutenant Duncan and Captain Abraham and went looking for him. They went to the address Brandy gave them, but he no longer lived there. They checked his records and found another address. When they arrived, they knocked on the door, and a male fitting Donny's description answered. They asked him if he was Donny Williams, but he said his name was Josh, and he lived there with his wife. He was hesitant and uncomfortable. They asked to come inside and speak to his wife. He let them in, and before he called his wife he admitted he was Donny. Since he had an outstanding warrant, Kay and Sheila arrested him and took him to the office. When they got back, Captain Abraham met them at the door. The case took a sudden turn.

Bobby Abraham had been in law enforcement for over 25 years, and he had a way of talking with people. He could look a person in the eye and ask hard questions, but his tendency to be direct did not come across as judgmental or condescending. Brandy's story about Donny Williams didn't make sense to him, so he sat down with her and told her he believed she and her brother murdered Julian and left Alice for dead. Brandy did not like his theory, and true to her character, she had plenty to say.

It is unusual for a sociopath to be loyal but she was, and her loyalty was the only positive trait she possessed. She would do anything to protect her brother, but she didn't have to lie to protect him, she had to tell the truth. Her confession to Captain was not recorded, so when she finished talking, he called Lieutenant Duncan to listen to her story. She retold it while Bill took notes, but there was still no recorder. It was her third interview in a matter of hours, and her second confession.

While she gave her confession, Bill watched her eyes and described them as shark-like. By that, he meant she could look a person in the eye and cut his

throat. Bill said she was void of natural feeling, except when it came to her brother. That weakness, in her otherwise cold heart, was her Achilles' heel. She was a protective big sister.

Instead of her brother, it was her boyfriend, Robert Coleman, and her who committed the home invasion and shot the Brandons. She gave them details of how she lured Mr. Brandon to the front door while Robert stabbed him. She said they shot Alice because she could identify them. They hoped to get a lot of money from them, but that didn't happen.

In Brandy's confession, she gave details that could only have been known by someone who was there, but her story did not end when they left Primitive Baptist Church Road. Bill Duncan was shocked when Brandy claimed she killed another man and left him on a dirt road near her house twenty four hours earlier. If true, it was a crime that had not been reported.

Kay knew it was imperative to get Brandy's confession recorded. There were no interview rooms at the office. Detectives interviewed suspects at their desk in rooms that sometimes held two detectives. At 3 am, Kay set up a micro-cassette recorder and pushed record. Brandy sat across the desk from her while Sheila sat beside Brandy.

At the beginning of the interview, She said her boyfriend Robert Coleman gave her a yellow bracelet for Christmas. It was the same bracelet Deputy Vaitkus found on the kitchen floor at the crime scene, nine hours earlier. When talking to the Captain and Lieutenant, Brandy left Donny Williams out, but this time she brought him back. She told them how she, Robert, and Donny went to the Brandon's home on New Year's Day at 10 pm.

Up to that moment, no one knew when the attacks occurred. New Years' Day, 2013, was Wednesday, but it wasn't until Sunday, four days later, that the Brandon's were found. That meant Alice, who had two gunshot wounds to her head, laid in her own blood and excrement struggling to breathe for 92 merciless hours.

Brandy went to the front door of the home while Coleman and Williams hid around the corner. When she knocked on the door Julian answered.

"Do you own the church next door?" Bethel Primitive Baptist Church was next door to the Brandon's house in the same place it had been for over one hundred years. Julian told her he did not own the church, but he was a retired minister.

It is impossible to know what was on Julian's mind that night, but it is safe to say he did not anticipate someone coming to his home to kill him and his wife. He didn't have to open the door, but on New Year's Day at 10 pm, he looked through his window and saw someone in need, and it was a young woman. He opened the door because he could not turn his back on her. He had a call from God. While his desire to love his neighbor as himself included physical help, his primary call was to preach the gospel of Christ so sinners could be saved from the wrath to come.

The Associate Pastor at the First Baptist Church of Blanchard would agree. Reverend Dale Sauls told the *Shreveport Times*, "We can't imagine people who knew the Brandons well would want to do this to them. Yet for him as a minister, he would want them to repent and be saved."

But he wasn't given an opportunity to speak the gospel that night because he was ambushed. Brandy had a .380 semi automatic pistol, and she put it under

the man of God's chin and pulled the trigger. As he fell near the door, Robert and Donny rushed in behind her, and found Alice in the living room, scared to death. They forced her to her bedroom to get her purse. Brandy demanded money, and Alice gave her all she had which was six dollars. She frantically searched for more, but could only come up with some credit cards. Brandy demanded the PIN number for the ATM card and snatched it from her hand.

Once Brandy got what she wanted from the preacher's wife, she gave her the bad news. Since she saw her face, she had to die. There was no other choice. Without a thought of mercy, she placed the little pistol in her ear. Alice responded by saying, "Sweet Jesus!" Brandy pulled the trigger, but Alice was still alive, so she shot her again in the forehead. Alice's last words before being incapacitated said a lot about who she was.

After everyone in the house was dead or dying, Donny went into the attic searching for treasure, but all he found was Christmas decorations, luggage, boxes of old clothes, and furniture. Despite her and Robert's appeals to hurry, Donny stayed in the attic longer than he should have.

Brandy tried to cast positive light on people she had affection for even if it reflected badly on her. She started the trend with her brother, and now she continued it with her boyfriend. She said Robert did not shoot or harm anyone. He was only interested in making money, and he told her not to shoot Alice. Donny, not Robert, was the one who killed Julian, and Robert got so upset when she shot Alice that he left them at the scene. Donny and Brandy didn't leave until they stole everything they could.

Three days passed, and no one knew about the murders. Brandy and her pals thought they got away with them, so she decided to do it again.

She told detectives she was in a gang with two men, one she knew only as Marcus and the other was Terrance Blaze. Marcus was a drug dealer, and Terry worked for him. When Terry didn't pay up for merchandise received, Marcus wanted an explanation, so he talked Brandy into going with him to get to the bottom of it.

On Saturday night, Marcus had Brandy drive his car while he hid in the back seat. Brandy picked Terry up at a convenience store and took him for a ride. While they were talking, Marcus unexpectedly popped up from the back seat with a gun and shot Terry in the head. Brandy said it happened so quickly that it shocked her.

They took Terry's body to a gravel road near Brandy's house, dumped it and covered it with branches and leaves. Marcus's car was covered with blood, so they took it to Brandy's house and cleaned it with bleach and detergent.

There were several problems with her story. First of all, the detectives needed to find out if Terry Blaze was real, and if he was dead. Secondly, if Robert Coleman wasn't with them for the murder, he should have known about the bloody car they washed at Brandy's house. Robert's interview would have been a good time to tell the detectives about it, but he didn't. Thirdly, she said Robert was not involved in Terry's murder, but he was the common denominator between Brandy and murder. She never killed anyone until she met him.

Kay noted in her report, "Brandy had been very calm and seemed not to be nervous during the interviews. She did not cry or become upset at any time during

the interviews. When she talked about the murder of Mr. Brandon and the attempted murder of Mrs. Brandon she talked as if [sic] was an everyday affair. Her emotions stayed the same throughout the interview.”

When the interview was over, Kay and Sergeant Gary Frake took Brandy to find Terrance Blaze’s body. She led them to a gravel road where they found him covered with brush having been thrown there like trash disposed in an out of the way place. Her unbelievable story was true, confirmed by the corpse of a creature who was made in God’s image. The irresponsible attempt to hide his body would not have kept it concealed for long. The reason it took so long to discover the Brandons was the distraction of the holidays, but the holidays were officially over. When the Crime Scene Investigators arrived, Kay turned the scene over to them and took Brandy back to the office.

While Brandy sat across from her desk, Kay organized her paperwork and cassettes. She labeled three micro-cassettes from the interview and put them in her desk drawer. While someone watched Brandy, she went down the hall to review the case with Captain Abraham.

There were three people accused of murder, and one of them confessed. Brandy freely told detectives she was a murderer while Robert Coleman denied being involved, but he did not give a detailed, convincing alibi. Though Brandy accused Donny Williams, he denied any involvement and gave the detectives an alibi they had yet to verify. Donny had an outstanding warrant for an unrelated crime, so they held him in jail until they could dig deeper.

There was plenty of evidence collected at the scene to be sent to the crime lab, and the detectives anticipated finding more. Only twelve hours after the first body was found, the detectives had a good idea what happened. In addition, they discovered a second homicide that was never reported. That was good detective work for any agency.

After talking with Captain Abraham, Kay went back to her office where Brandy was sitting. She opened her desk drawer but could not find the micro-cassettes she put there minutes earlier. She looked everywhere but found only one of them. Sheila helped her search and found one of the missing cassettes in the trash can in the bathroom, but the tape inside was missing.

With her evidence gone, Kay asked Brandy to do another interview. Brandy said she was too tired and then admitted she stole the tapes and flushed them down the toilet. She told Captain Abraham, “...the detective knew I was a criminal when she left the tape in here with me, and that was just stupid on her part.” Captain talked Brandy into doing another recorded interview.

At 8:26 am, Kay Ward and Captain Abraham interviewed Brandy all over again. It was her fifth interview in twelve hours, and every interview was different from the preceding one. This time Donny Williams was back with a prominent role in the murders. Brandy knew Donny from school and ran across him just before New Year’s Day. While they talked, she told him she needed some money, and she thought they could get it by robbing Mr. Brandon. She told Donnie they could make some quick cash, but she didn’t want anyone getting hurt. In here earlier interviews, she admitted she shot the Brandons, but this time she blamed everything on Donny, and Robert Coleman was not involved at all.

Their haul from the robbery was far less than expected, so a day later, Brandy used Alice's ATM card at the bank directly across the street from the office where she was currently being interviewed. When the PIN number would not work, she cursed Alice, who she thought was dead, for deceiving her with the wrong number. She burned the cards near the spot where she later disposed of Terry Blaze.

As if she had not shocked the detectives enough, she followed up her interview by telling them of a dream she had the day before. In the dream, she was at the Brandon's house and saw Alice lying on the floor with two gunshot wounds to her head; only Alice was alive, haunting her. When she woke up, she told Robert, "The bitch is still alive!"

Four hours before the crime was discovered on Sunday, Brandy went back to the Brandon's house to see if her dream was true, and she wasn't alone. Instead of bringing Robert or Donny, she brought her two nephews with her. She went to the back of the house, told the boys there was a dead man inside, and asked them if they wanted to see him. The oldest one said no, but his nine year-old brother wanted to go in. She took him inside, but when he saw Julian lying by the front door, he ran out as fast as he could, leaving Brandy alone. The Brandon's dog was sitting near Julian, and he growled at her. She could hear Alice struggling to breath from the bedroom. She went to the bedroom, but Alice was not where they left her, and she could not go any further because she was afraid the dog would attack her. Brandy said she intended to finish her off by slitting her throat, but she changed her mind and decided to call 911. She never made the call. Instead, she left Alice to suffer. Later that day a friend came by to check on the Brandons, and without hesitation called 911.

It was mid-morning on Monday. Brandy's fifth interview was over. Robert Coleman, who had been dozing under the watchful eyes of detectives, was still at the office in the conference room. Kay felt like she needed to release him, so she asked Detective Jay Morgan to take him home. Jay knew nothing about the case, but he was willing to help. He took Robert to Brandy's house and left him at the front door, but before he was a mile away, Kay called him and told him Captain Abraham said to bring him back immediately.

That put Morgan in a bind. Robert was a killer who needed to be taken into custody. He wasn't likely to be cooperative now that he had a second chance to be free, and the murder weapon was still unaccounted for. Jay carefully walked up to the front door of the trailer and found Robert with his luggage beside him. He told Jay he was trying to get a ride to the bus station. Jay said he would be happy to take him when they got done at the office, so Robert brought his stuff with him. He didn't realize he was hand delivering vital evidence against him.

When they got to the office, Kay went through his bag and found a pair of jeans that had burgundy spots on them that looked like blood. Robert told her it was rust. She had a crime scene investigator test the spots for blood, and they tested positive. When Robert found out, he changed his story and said the blood came from a cut on his hand. Kay booked him in jail for first degree murder. At booking, she seized his boots and put them in evidence. Those boots would play an important role in the case.

Brandy was also booked for first degree murder. At the booking desk, she told deputies her alias was Trouble. She lived up to her nickname.

The case was 17 hours old.

## Part 4

### No Stone Unturned.

*“With a heart untouched to pity misfortune, and with a character possessing the attributes of the damned, he was reveled in brutal murder and glorified in his shame.”*

—Robert Utley on Billy the Kid

Every investigation is fluid. There was probable cause to arrest Brandy and Robert, and Donny was being held on a warrant, but there was much left to do. Brandy told five different stories to detectives, and in her only recorded statement she blamed Donny Williams for shooting Julian and Alice Brandon, and she claimed Marcus LNU killed Terrance Blaze. Regardless of the details of both crimes, Brandy was the common denominator. Her past behavior was enough to lead anyone to believe she was the driving force of the atrocities, but murder, at least the way it happened to the Brandons and Terrance Blaze, was uncommon in Caddo Parish. Crimes like that were rarely done by women.

Paul Carmouche had been the District Attorney of Caddo Parish for 24 years. He told the *Shreveport Times*, “My experience has been that normally you’d see this from a man. It’s just our experience in Caddo Parish that less of these types of crimes are committed by women. That type of case normally results in the death penalty.”

Women who kill usually don’t kill people the way Brandy did; they kill someone they know. It is estimated that half the women on death row in this country are there for murdering a husband, boyfriend, child, or grandchild.

In an article from the *Shreveport Times*, Victor Streib, an Ohio law professor and expert on women and the death penalty said, “The sort of classic stranger-killing that men engage in is unusual for women. We have found that a group of women, those who kill a stranger, who kill in a very violent, shocking kind of way ... if a woman does that, this group seems to be treated (by juries) like a man.”

The death penalty was on everyone’s mind. The crimes were heartless, brutal, and senseless. The town of Blanchard was shaken. A day after the arrests, Perry Hughes who lived down the road from the Brandons told the *Shreveport Times*, “This has been devastating for the neighborhood.” Bubba Talbert, a friend of the Brandon’s said it best, “It’s been a nightmare... it’s devastating. It’s like a bad dream. We’re all shaken.”

Two people were dead, another mortally wounded, and three people were in jail less than twenty-four hours after the crimes were reported, but bad guys in jail are not enough to win a conviction. There must be details. There must be corroboration. No stone can go unturned, and there was still a lot of stone turning to be done.

Brandy's accounts of the crimes left a lot of unanswered questions like: who actually pulled the trigger on the three victims? Who was Marcus, the alleged murderer of Terrance Blaze? What was Robert Coleman's exact role? Were Donny Williams and Brandy's brother involved?

After Brandy led Kay Ward and Gary Frake to Terrance Blaze's body on Monday morning, they waited for CSI and the Coroner to arrive. While waiting, Brandy told Kay, "Ms. Ward, have you ever loved somebody so much that you would do anything for them?" Kay asked her if she was talking about Robert Coleman. She said she was.

Her question sounded romantic, like Bonnie and Clyde, but it was far more revealing than it was romantic. When she told them how Blaze was killed, she did not include Robert in her story. She said her friend Marcus shot Blaze in the head, so why would she tell Kay she would do anything for Robert while she was standing over Blaze's body? If Marcus killed Terry, the question didn't make sense; instead, it was a piece of the puzzle.

Robert and Brandy were obsessed with making a name for themselves. They were out of town guests who thought they could get rich quick and get back to Mississippi before anyone knew they were in Blanchard. The problem with their plan was that both of them broadcast their intentions to anyone who listened, and they committed their crimes within a mile radius of Brandy's mother's house.

Brandy was a thief, and Robert was an armed robber. Together they had murderous synergy. Their crime spree produced little by way of loot, but it was costly; the kind of thing the Brandon and Blaze families would never get over. Their plans were horribly executed, and Brandy bragged about being a murderer. Despite their desire to get rich, it seemed like the main reason they killed was to have a reputation for being cold blooded killers.

After Brandy and Robert were in jail, the detectives tracked down a long list of witnesses. They found out that robbery had been in the couple's plans from the beginning. They stole Brandy's father's pistol in Mississippi, and when they arrived in Louisiana, Robert often talked about hitting a lick. Their desire to rob and kill was without discretion. Their friends were as likely to be targets as were strangers. During the week of Christmas, Brandy called at least two people she knew and offered them sex for money. She told them she was trying to raise money to get back to Mississippi, but their plan was to roll them. Terry Blaze took the bait and wound up dead.

On New Year's Eve, there was a party at Brandy's. An attendee walked into a bedroom and saw Brandy's brother hand Robert a small, semi-automatic pistol. He quickly left the room, but a few minutes later, Robert found him and apologized for scaring him. He told him he was looking for someone to rob.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Tuesday after Brandy was in jail for a day, Detectives Kay Ward and Jeff Ivey went to see her. Jeff was a detective in the juvenile division. The belief that her brother had something to do with the crimes was still lingering, so they confronted her about it. Like before, she was incredulous. The allegation angered her so much that they had to change the subject to calm her down. Fortunately, nothing could

keep her quiet, and her sixth interview was a conglomeration of the preceding ones along with some new information.

Between Christmas and New Year's Day, Brandy and Robert looked for houses to rob. On at least two occasions, they went to a gated neighborhood in Blanchard called Nob Hill attempting to lure someone outside to ambush them. Two days after Christmas at 9 pm, they knocked on a woman's door and claimed they were looking for someone. The woman was suspicious when they knocked on her door, and when she looked outside, she saw Robert hiding in the bushes. She slammed the door and dead-bolted it.

Three nights later, Brandy and Robert returned to the same home, but the woman would not open the door. She called 911, but Robert and Brandy fled before deputies arrived. According to the Shreveport Times, "The convicted killer later told detectives had [anonymous] let her in, she would have done the same things to her that she did to the Brandons."

Around Christmas time, the Sheriff's Office received a phone call from someone asking for the code to get in the gate at Nob Hill. The caller, who was from Chicago, said she was in town visiting her mother, but she could not reach her to get the gate code. The dispatcher said the caller sounded like a white woman trying to sound black, and she didn't have a Chicago accent. The Caller ID showed the call came from Brandy's mother's house.

The detectives asked Brandy about Terry Blaze. She still said Marcus killed him, and she told them, "I'm going down for it cause y'all ain't gonna find Marcus anywhere."

They continued to push until she admitted Blaze was murdered with the same .380 pistol that killed Julian and mortally wounded Alice wife. The thought of the pistol caused her to abandon the Blaze murder and return to Alice, who, it seemed, still haunted her. After Alice gave her all her money, Brandy told her, "I gotta do this." Alice knew what she meant. Brandy made her put a pillow over her head, and she took the pistol, but it only snapped. Brandy said it was jammed. Donny took the gun away from her and promptly shot Alice in the head.

The day before, Brandy told detectives she shot Alice, but later she destroyed the interview tapes. Now she accused Donny of the murder, but the problem was semi-auto pistols don't click unless it is unloaded and the slide is pulled back and released. If the pistol jammed after it was used on Julian like Brandy said, it wouldn't have done anything at all and couldn't be fired until the jam was cleared.

Brandy's brother stone-walled detectives when he was interviewed on Sunday, but now that she was in jail, he was ready to talk. He was not lying when he said he wasn't involved, but he knew about the murders all along. He told detectives Brandy and Robert left home on January 1st around 10 pm to go for a walk, and he described the clothes they were wearing. They returned 45 minutes later, and Brandy went straight to the bathroom to clean up while Robert waited for her behind the closed door of the bedroom. As soon as she came out, Robert went in and cleaned up. When he came out, the couple closed themselves up in the bedroom. He knew something was going on, so he walked in the bed room and asked them. Brandy told him they did something really bad, and when he pressed her, she said she, Donny, and Robert killed an old couple. It was interesting that she included Donny, but her brother never saw him. Robert told him he fought an



old man, stabbed him with a knife, and then threw the knife in the kitchen sink. Later his story was corroborated by evidence.

It was supposed to be a robbery, but Brandy told her brother they only got \$6 cash and some credit cards. Even he recognized the crimes weren't just about money; he believed Brandy and Robert were trying to be somebody, and that was the only way they knew how to do it. He told detectives Brandy returned to the crime scene on two occasions after the shootings looking for more jewelry. On Friday, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, and Sunday, January 5<sup>th</sup>, she knew Alice was still alive because she heard her struggling to breathe. She showed him the .380 pistol she stole from her father when she got home from Mississippi. He said Robert kept it in his travel bag most of the time, but sometimes he took it out and waved it around. He presumed the pistol was used in the murders.

The detectives asked him about the night Terrance Blaze was murdered. He told them, "I know she was calling him a lot. She was calling him trying to get him over to the house and stuff." Brandy and Robert left home in his mother's car on Saturday night, January 4<sup>th</sup>, after dark. The car was equipped with a breath machine attached to the ignition to prevent an intoxicated person from driving it. His mom received the machine by court order as a result of a DWI. She was a known alcoholic, and in the future, she would attempt to use her alcoholism to defend her daughter.

Brandy blew in the machine to get the car started which inferred that Robert was drunk when he ended up driving. They told the family they were going to Western Union to pick up some money for bus fare back to Mississippi. About an hour later, they returned home, and he saw Robert put the .380 pistol in his coat pocket. He said the gun had blood on it. After they spent a few minutes inside the trailer, they went back outside and cleaned the interior of the car with bleach and detergent. He never saw them with anyone else. If Robert was driving, it was likely that Brandy was the one in the back seat who shot Terry in the head.

His revelation that Terry was murdered in his momma's car was big news. When detectives looked inside the 1984 Chevy Caprice, they saw what appeared to be blood on the seats. They seized it and searched it for evidence.

Robert and Brandy used white towels to clean the car. When they finished, they came inside, but later left twice on foot. When they returned, her brother said, "They acted different. They acted upset, like—I'm not sure what they acted (sic) or how they were feeling or anything, but they were nervous." He saw blood on the towels and knew they shot someone. He told the detectives the bloody towels were still at the house in a garbage bag.

One of the mysteries of the case was Brandy's claim that Donny Williams was involved in the murders. She not only told detectives he was involved, she also told her little brother before she was arrested, yet despite her claims, Donny adamantly denied any involvement, and he had a strong alibi. Donny and his wife had a New Year's party at their home, and several people were there and verified his presence. There was no physical evidence to link him to the crimes, and Brandy's brother never saw him with Brandy and Robert before or after the murders. It was also interesting that during the early part of the investigation, Brandy told the detectives where Donny lived, but he had not lived in that house for some time.

So, why did Brandy accuse him? There was no definite answer, but it appeared that Donny and Brandy had a relationship in the past, and when she came back from Mississippi, she saw him in the neighborhood. He told her he was married and working a steady job. He had grown up and was being responsible, and those were two things Brandy could never be. Between Christmas and New Year's she called him several times and asked him to bring his wife over so she could meet her, but his wife refused. Her refusal might have saved their lives. Perhaps Brandy had a thing for him, and she was jealous that he was happily married.

Of the five people suspected in the crimes, two of them, Donny and Brandy's brother, had clear cut alibis, and one of them, Marcus, did not exist. The only thing that could change things was physical evidence, but that physical evidence was never found. Brandy and Robert were not so lucky.

Over the next week the detectives worked with the Caddo Parish District Attorney's Office doing interviews and searches of everyone and everything they thought could be involved in the case. They seized clothing and boots from Donny Williams. They sent Robert Coleman's boots to the crime lab to test the blood on them, they searched Brandy's mother's home twice, and they searched her car.

During the initial search of the house they found two pillows that appeared to have bullet holes in them, a box of rubber gloves, a Wal-Mart shopping card, clothing that appeared to have blood on it, and a leather jacket and jewelry taken in the burglary of Brandy's neighbor's house. The couple stole the rubber gloves from a clinic where they received free checkups. They stole the gloves to use them in their crimes.

About a week later they searched the house a second time. They got on top of the house, and found a plastic glove containing spent .380 shells and jewelry in the gutters. One of the items was a bracelet that was identified by Alice's daughter as a gift she gave her for Christmas a few years earlier.

Two weeks after Robert Coleman was arrested for the murder of Julian Brandon, he called the detectives and asked to speak with them. It sounded like he was ready to tell the truth, but it didn't happen. As evil as Brandy was, she confessed her crimes. Coleman never did. Brandy's confession was due to her need for attention rather than a sensitive conscience. Robert was concerned only with himself.

When the detectives arrived at the jail to talk to him he told them, "The reason why I wanted – the reason why I – like I said, I asked for someone, you know, I don't know nothing about none of this here." His first sentence set the tone for the rest of the interview. It was incoherent and delusional. "I don't know nothing" is a double negative, and according to the rules of grammar, "A double negative is the nonstandard usage of two negatives used in the same sentence so that they cancel each other and create a positive." (From Literary Education on Line) Experienced detectives listen for double negatives from suspects because they are indicative of deception. It was the closest Robert ever came to a confession.

He stuttered and stammered through the interview, trying to distance himself from Brandy. He said, "I didn't even know Brandy was this type of person, you know..." but he knew exactly what type of person she was, and that was why he was attracted to her in the first place. She was the type of girl he could influence, and he knew it.

He stuck to his alibi of sleeping and drinking a lot. He told them nothing except the reason he wanted to talk to them in the first place and that was because he was not pleased with the way he was being portrayed at the jail. He told them, "I'm being treated—I'm being treated as—as I'm—I'm a murderer, you know."

Robert was learning that a life of murder and robbery was not all it was cracked up to be, but it was too late.

## Part 5

### **Live Spelled Backwards is Evil.**

*"Although the evidence at this trial shows that Charles Manson was the leader of the conspiracy to commit these murders, there is no evidence that he actually personally killed any of the seven victims in this case."*

—L.A. Prosecutor Vincent Buglisi, January 15, 1971

A full year passed... then two.

Robert Coleman went to trial first on the Brandon case. His defense team portrayed him as the victim of a crazy girlfriend. The defense concluded that since he never admitted to being involved he could not be guilty.

The DA's Office assigned their heavy hitters to the case: Lea Hall, Ed Blewer, and Hugo Holland. All three were long time Assistant District Attorneys. They were men who believed they could make a difference in public service, and they did. They were men of great intelligence, but what set them apart was a rational sense of right and wrong.

The first two days of Coleman's trial were spent choosing a jury from a pool of 55 Caddo Parish citizens. Few people consider the importance of serving on a jury, and most people do everything possible to avoid jury service. It is an inconvenience, but if good people are not on juries, justice is impossible. Choosing a jury is an important part of the trial, for the prosecution and the defense. Just how important it would be in Coleman's trial would be known later.

Robert Coleman's defense team was full of talent. The defense team consisted of men who spoke up for the disenfranchised and were opposed to the death penalty. They were men who equated the death of Julian Brandon with the death of Charles Manson or some other depraved criminal, all in a pretense of placing a high value on life.

Punishment is a word we despise, at least as it pertains to ourselves. We don't like to be punished, but punishment is necessary to build character in our lives. People will not stop certain behaviors unless there is adequate punishment. For some offenses, punishment must be severe. For reckless disregard of life, the death penalty is just punishment. The Caddo DAs Office was seeking the death penalty for Robert Coleman.

On Sunday, February 13, 2005, Assistant District Attorney Ed Blewer made his opening statements in Judge Scott Crichton's courtroom. Ed told the jury there

were two New Year's Eve parties on December 31, 2002 in Blanchard, Louisiana. One of the parties was at the Brandon's home, and the other was at Brandy Holmes' mobile home. At the Brandon home, guests ate good food and enjoyed each other's company as they looked forward to a wonderful new year. At the other party, Robert Coleman and Brandy Holmes were planning a home invasion robbery.

The prosecution put the witness on the stand that saw Robert with a gun on New Year's Eve. The witness testified of the conversation he had with Coleman when he asked him where he could hit a lick.

Detectives went on the stand. They told about searching Brandy's home where Coleman was staying and finding Alice Brandon's jewelry and two pillows with bullet holes in them. They told about Robert's arrest and when they seized his boots.

A criminologist took the stand. He explained how he found and identified Julian Brandon's blood on Robert Coleman's boots.

In a controversial move, the prosecution called two inmates as witnesses. The inmates, Collies Sharpes and Bobbie Evans, had conversations with Coleman at Caddo Correction Center. According to the Shreveport Times, "Coleman said they were in a knock-off game,' Sharpes testified. 'He said they were in to robbing, breaking in and knocking people off. A knocking off is a thing they do to kill people.'"

Bobbie Evans told the jury Coleman told him he was testing Brandy Holmes to see if she could kill someone. Brandy failed because she "...ratted everyone out." The prisoner's stories made sense in light of Brandy Holmes question to Kay Ward as she stood over Terry Blaze's murdered body, "Have you ever loved somebody so much you would do anything for them?" Brandy's inspiration for murder was Robert Coleman.

Caddo Coroner Dr. George McCormick took the stand for the prosecution. He told the jurors that Julian Brandon suffered nine fatal wounds in a "blitz attack." The Coroner said Julian did not have a chance.

When the prosecution rested, the defense called its witnesses. Their strategy was to muddy the water as much as possible. To do so, they blamed the crimes on Brandy Holmes and her brother. They said Robert Coleman had nothing to do with the home invasion of the Brandons. They claimed he could not have been involved because an eyewitness saw two white males at the scene. They explained that Brandy was white and boyish looking, and due to her behavior, she could have easily been mistaken for a male. They suggested the second white male was either Brandy's brother or Donny Williams. They said it couldn't be Robert Coleman because he was black.

To prove their theory, the defense called the paramedic, Tommy Adams, from Life Air Rescue, the local medical helicopter that took Alice to the hospital on January 5, 2003. Tommy was a well known Shreveport Fireman with twenty five years of experience. Though he had no role in the investigation, Adams took a statement from Alice who was the only eyewitness at the scene. The Times reported, "A paramedic who treated the wife of homicide victim the Rev. Julian Brandon told jurors Wednesday that the woman was lucid when she described two white males who shot her and her husband."

Tommy Adams gave them the opening they needed to inject their conspiracy theory into the trial. If Alice Brandon said there were two white males that shot her and her husband, her statement should be taken seriously, but the obvious problem was that Alice Brandon was shot in the head on January 1, 2003, not once, but twice. For four days, she lay helplessly on her bedroom floor. Though her telephone was inches away, she was incapable of using or even locating it to call 9-1-1. If not for concerned friends, Alice would have died on her bedroom floor from blood loss, dehydration, and hunger. To say Alice was lucid while receiving medical treatment for two bullet wounds to the head was questionable at best, and to claim she was able to clearly describe her attackers was unreasonable.

During cross examination, ADA Lea Hall pointed out that Alice was asked short, closed-ended questions such as, how many attackers were there, and were they white or black. Furthermore, the deputies at the scene (who were in charge of the investigation) didn't ask Alice any questions at all because her injuries were life threatening. One of the first persons on the scene, Sergeant Bill Gaines, wrote in his report that he heard gurgling as Alice fought to breathe, and she had froth coming from her mouth.

Bill wrote in his report, "She told one of the paramedics her first name was 'Alice,' answered 'yes' to the question of whether she wore glasses and 'no' to whether she wanted them brought to the hospital. One of the rescuers asked her if she knew how she had been injured and she did not respond. I asked her no questions as not to interfere with her medical treatment."

To counter the defense's claim, the prosecution put Alice's daughter on the stand. Her daughter had been caring for her for over two years since the shootings. She testified that Alice was unable to speak clearly and unable to testify in court proceedings. That made Chief Adams' claims hearsay.

On February 21, 2009, Chief Tommy Adams and his family participated in Shreveport's annual Mardi Gras parade with the fire department. After the parade, Chief Adams climbed on the back of his fire truck to clean it up. A short time later, he was found lying on the ground beside the truck. As his wife and children looked on, his brother firefighters gave him CPR and saved his life, but his neck and back were broken, and no one knew how long his heart was stopped. The Chief remained unresponsive for the next ten months before he breathed his last.

On Thursday, February 17, 2005, the attorneys made their closing arguments in the murder trial. After 4-1/2 hours of deliberation, the jury found Robert Glen Coleman guilty of the first degree murder of Julian Brandon. The Louisiana statute for first degree murder fit Coleman's crime for at least three reasons: Coleman had the specific intent to kill or inflict great bodily harm while engaged in (1) an armed robbery, (2) on more than one person, and (3) upon a victim sixty-five years or older. In Louisiana, a guilty verdict of first degree murder qualifies the offender for the death penalty. If the offender receives mercy, he is given a life sentence at hard labor.

Not everyone was happy about the verdict. Coleman's mother told the Shreveport Times, "Justice was not served." No mother would be happy about her son being guilty of first degree murder, but justice, as best it can be on this earth, was served.

After the verdict, Caddo Assistant District Attorney Lea Hall made this observation, “More than anything, it was him wearing the bloody boots. He couldn’t escape his own boots.” In the end, forensic science made the case, but the scientists had plenty of help. Robert’s choice of a girlfriend alone was enough to cast serious doubt on his character, and the circumstantial evidence against him was nothing to scoff at. Fortunately, the real evidence revealed Julian’s blood on his boots, and the bloody boots corroborated Brandy’s brother’s testimony. It also corroborated some of Brandy’s statements. Ultimately, there was more real evidence of murder and mayhem against Robert Coleman than there was against Charles Manson.

On Saturday, February 19, 2005, the nine woman, three man jury on the Coleman case heard arguments for and against the death penalty. According to the Times, Defense Attorney Richard Goorley told the jury, ”I’d like to know if you think Robert Coleman is the one who did it, was he with the person who did it or did he know who did? Is that enough for you to take someone’s life when you’re not sure what his involvement was?”

Goorley failed to remind the jurors that Coleman had four days between January 1st and 5th to notify the police of the crime. He didn’t mention that Robert had two meetings with detectives and on both occasions failed to give a reasonable alibi, or that the jury already found him guilty.

The jury went into deliberation behind closed doors at 5 pm. Three hours and twenty minutes later they returned to open court. Their verdict was death.

Death sounds cold and hopeless, and I guess it was for Robert and his attorneys. Prior to the return of the verdict the Shreveport Times reported, “Goorley asked that Coleman’s life be spared, stressing that sentencing him to death would have the same effect on the Coleman family that the minister’s death has had on the Brandon family.” The attorney’s comparison of the two men came across as callous and unreasonable.

Robert Coleman’s conviction and death sentence were as just as a human court could be, but everyone didn’t see it that way. Goorley closed his attempt to thwart the death penalty for Robert Coleman with these words, “It’s ironic that the state says that killing someone is wrong, however, we need to kill someone.”

The State does not say that killing someone is wrong. The State allows for justified homicides in self-defense, protection of human life, and the abortion of human beings. The State does not say killing is always wrong; the State says murder is wrong. The State says invading the sanctity of a home and executing the residents is wrong. The State says the preying on and attacking the vulnerable is wrong.

## **Part 6**

### **Here Comes Trouble.**

*“The devil came to me and bid me serve him...”*

—Tituba during the Salem Witch Trials

Brandy, aka Trouble, returned to her home away from home: jail. During the stay she raked up 44 disciplinary incidents, but most of them were fairly minor. There was the time that she was biting her left wrist and refused to quit when ordered to. Deputies placed her in a restraint chair, but she promptly defied them and got out, so they strapped her to a board. Eventually she lost her appetite. Then there was the time she told a deputy she hated that she looked up her address in the telephone book, and she was coming to her house to kill her. It was a threat they took seriously.

Sheila Wright was the Director of the nursing staff at Caddo Correction Center with twenty years in law enforcement when Trouble came to CCC. Sheila participated in Brandy's initial mental health evaluation. She described Brandy's demeanor as, "...extremely animated." Brandy told the professionals in the meeting she admired nurses, and she only lacked a semester or two from graduating from nursing school herself. Brandy apparently confused the state penitentiary with college because that was where she was during her formative years. Furthermore, nursing schools don't enroll felons, but in Brandy's world, a lie was as good as the truth. During her counseling sessions she often stared at people, and it was intimidating. Sheila Wright said, "... it was as if she didn't have a soul."

Almost exactly a year after Robert Coleman's trial, on February 11, 2006, Brandy Holmes went to trial. It had been three years since the tragedy.

Caddo ADA Lea Hall made the opening statements for the prosecution. He told the court, "It was murder for the sake of murder. Keep that phrase in mind because that's exactly what this case is about."

The defense countered Lea's statements, but this is the best they could come up with, "There's no evidence beyond reasonable doubt that Brandy Holmes is guilty of first-degree murder. Evidence will show she's guilty of second-degree murder." When your attorney agrees with the prosecution that you are guilty of murder in the second degree, it is not good. Trouble was in trouble.

For the defense, there wasn't any use denying the obvious. Their only hope was to keep her off death row. They claimed Robert Coleman was the real bad guy, and Brandy was just guilty of obeying his instructions. They claimed he had specific intent to kill, but Brandy didn't.

On the second day of the trial, the prosecution had a surprise for the jury when they put Brandy's 12 year old nephew on the stand. He was a tender, 9 year old when Auntie took him on a field trip to the home where she and Coleman left two people for dead. He told the court she took him there to see his first dead body. He said she led him inside the house where he saw an old man lying in a pool of blood. As soon as he saw him, he fled out the back door. His testimony was a devastating blow.

Day three of the trial highlighted some of the physical evidence in the case. The pistol used in the crimes was never found, but early in the investigation the detectives called Brandy's father in Mississippi and confirmed his .380 semi-automatic pistol had been stolen. Detectives believed it was the pistol used to shoot the Brandon's, but it was allegedly in the bottom of nearby Cross Lake. They

went to Mississippi and found a tree that was used as a back stop for target practice with the pistol, and they recovered a .380 bullet from the tree. They sent it to the crime lab to be compared to a partial bullet removed from Julian Brandon's head. The bullets were a forensic match proving they were fired from the same gun. The prosecution did not have the murder weapon, but they proved that it was the gun Brandy and Robert had. There was other evidence as well, such as Alice Brandon's jewelry found at Brandy's home, and Brandy's bracelet that was found in the Brandon's kitchen.

The defense did their best to prove Brandy was incapable of specific intent. They said she was intoxicated when she was picked up on January 5th and thus unable to give a coherent story. She made multiple statements during her seven hours with the detectives, sometimes admitting to the crimes, and sometimes blaming someone else, and that was enough to cast doubt on her mental state. They said she was confused and should be pitied rather than condemned, but they failed to mention the multiple confessions Brandy made to several people before the investigation ever began.

On Tuesday, Valentine's Day, 2006, the 4 men, 8 women jury went behind closed doors for deliberation. After 30 whole minutes, they returned to the courtroom and found Brandy guilty of first degree murder. The verdict made the 26 year old eligible for the death penalty.

All that was left of her trial was the sentencing phase. The only two choices were a life sentence or the death penalty. February 15th was spent debating the issue.

The prosecution could not talk about Terrance Blaze during the trial, but now that Brandy was found guilty, they could talk about it during the sentencing phase. They put Captain Abraham on the stand to recount the night Brandy told him about the murder. She confessed to the murder before anyone knew he was missing, and bullet that killed Terry came from the same gun that killed Julian Brandon and fatally wounded Alice Brandon. Before they rested, the prosecution told the jury about Brandy and Robert's plot to murder residents in the gated neighborhood of Nob Hill.

When it was the defense's turn, they brought Brandy's mother to the stand. She told the jury about her alcoholism, and how she abused alcohol when she was pregnant with Brandy. She said she loved alcohol so much that she named her baby after her favorite drink. The defense made a compelling argument that Brandy was the victim of fetal alcohol syndrome which caused her to have a personality disorder which hindered her ability to discern between right and wrong. They concluded she was not responsible for her behavior.

The judge presiding over Brandy's case was Judge Scott J. Crichton. The best judges are always former ADAs, and Judge Crichton was no exception. In response to the defense's claim that Brandy was mentally deficient, he told the court, "...there is no evidence that she is mentally retarded by law."

According to the Louisiana Code of Criminal Procedure, Title XXI, Chapter 1, Article 641, "Mental incapacity to proceed exists when, as a result of mental disease or defect, a defendant presently lacks the capacity to understand the proceedings against him or to assist in his defense." Since Brandy was found mentally fit to go to trial, Judge Crichton said she was mentally fit to be sentenced.



The defense looked to local Psychiatrist Mark Vigen for help. He said, "This woman has no sense of herself. She hasn't learned anything. Brandy doesn't even know who she is." Most people who knew Brandy felt like she behaved consistently with her self-realization. She systematically built her reputation by breaking rules. It was true that she did not learn anything from her arrest and trial, but she did not learn anything because she refused to. She had the opportunity, but she ignored it. Her goal was to be a cold, calculated killer, and she reached her goal.

One of Brandy's attorneys was David McClatchey. He told the jury, "I know she has done some of the most horrible things you can think of, but I'm begging you for mercy to spare Brandy's life. She's not like a puppy you get for Christmas that's defective and you throw it away. Whatever that's in her head to make right or wrong choices does not work. That's the way God gave Brandy to us, and we can't change that."

Before Judge Scott Crichton handed down Brandy's sentence he told the court, "I must say this case ranks among the most horrific murders in the history of Caddo Parish. I believe Ms. Holmes earned the death penalty."

Neither Brandy Holmes nor Robert Coleman was ever tried for killing Terrance Blaze.

## **Part 7**

### **Live by the Sword, Die by the Sword?**

*"If someone is that evil then they don't need to be on this earth."*

—Trudy Sistrunk, Julian Brandon's niece

Brandy was sent to Death Row at St. Gabriel Women's Prison in Baton Rouge where she was not alone.

In 1995, Antoinette Frank was a New Orleans Police Officer. Antoinette had a penchant for helping others. She took it upon herself to help wayward kids in her city. One of the people she helped was an 18 year old gunshot victim named Rogers LaCaze. Frank bought LaCaze clothes, a pager, and even a cell phone. She visited him regularly and soon began spending all her spare time with him. Eyebrows rose, but no one complained about her behavior. Alice Chaney, Rogers LaCaze's mother said, "Frank became obsessed with him."

Like many police officers, Antoinette supplemented her income by working off duty security. One of the officers on her shift was Ronnie Williams. Williams, a 25 year old father of two, was in charge of security at a Vietnamese restaurant called Kim Anh. Kim Anh was operated by the Vu family. Antoinette filled in for Williams when he was unable to be there. The Vus were kind to Antoinette, even giving her gifts at Christmas time.

On March 3, 1995, Antoinette got off her patrol shift at 11pm. Over the next three hours, she went to Kim Anh twice, and the employees found her presence that unsettling. Ronnie Williams was working security that night, and it wasn't

payday, so the employees wondered why she kept showing up. At 2 am, the restaurant was closed. The employee who was preparing the deposit for the next day saw Antoinette pull up, and he felt it necessary to hide \$10,000 in cash in the microwave.

This time Antoinette did not arrive alone. The restaurant was locked, but instead of leaving, she unlocked the front door with a key, and she and Rogers LaCaze came inside. LaCaze promptly pulled out a 9mm pistol and ambushed Williams, shooting him in the head, neck, and back. While Williams lay dying, LaCaze took his wallet and pistol. He handed the pistol to Antoinette.

The Vus were a hard working and religious family, and that night Cuong Vu and Ha Vu the owner's children, were working. At 17, Cuong felt God's call to be a priest while 24 year old Ha wanted to be a nun. From the back of the restaurant they heard the gunshots that killed their protector, Ronnie Williams, and they trembled were overcome with fear, but before they could hide, Antoinette and LaCaze burst in. The robbers pointed guns at them and demanded cash. Cuong and Ha dropped to their knees and prayed to God with such fervency that they didn't hear the robbers' demands. Unable to get a response, Antoinette shot them down in a hail of gunfire, killing Ha instantly and mortally wounding Cuong. When Cuong refused to die a timely death, she put a bullet in his head.

The couple stole what they could find and fled, but Antoinette's plan was not yet complete. LaCaze dropped her off at a nearby police station, and she got the keys to a police car about the same time the dispatch of the armed robbery at Kim Anh came out over the radio. She returned to the scene, masquerading as the first police officer to arrive. When other officers arrived right after her, the survivors, among whom were Cuong and Ha's brother and sister, Quoc and Chau, felt safe enough to whisper that Antoinette was the person who murdered Cuong and Ha and Officer Williams.

It was an awkward scene as the police took one of their own to the office for questioning. Much like Brandy, Antoinette readily confessed that Rogers LaCaze killed Officer Williams, and she killed Cuong and Ha; however, unlike Brandy she said she did because LaCaze made her.

Justice was uncharacteristically swift for Antoinette. By October of that year she went to trial and was convicted of first degree murder. It took little deliberation to send her to death row. In a separate trial, Rogers LaCaze received the same fate.

A month after her trial, a dog dug up human bones under Antoinette's house which included a skull with a bullet hole in it. The bones belonged to Antoinette's father who once lived with her. Two years before the Kim Anh murders, Antoinette reported him missing. She was never indicted for his murder.

It looked like Brandy Holmes would not be lonely in the Big House. For ten years she was side by side with a fellow sociopath, Antoinette.

Brandy's attorneys filed a plea for review with the US Supreme Court. The plea was based on the assumption that she had fetal alcohol syndrome. Three years later, on October 5, 2009 the Supreme Court rejected the plea for review.

Social networking is no longer just for those who are not incarcerated; people on death row need love too. Four years after Brandy's conviction she was listed on a website called LostVault. According to the site's Homepage, "Since September

2003, LostVault has been dedicated to maintaining a free place for inmates to find pen pals, and for you to find them.”

Brandy and several thousand other inmates have personal ads on LostVault. Brandy’s ad lists her address and interests, but the section describing her conviction is left blank. Perhaps ambush, robbery, and murder of unsuspecting, responsible adults might be unappealing to some. Under Brandy’s description the ad reads:

I'm endeavoring to connect with someone (male or female) who is educated, outspoken, insightful, honest, and can exhibit a creative imagination. I believe myself to be an intelligent young woman who's intriguing and compassionate, looking for a friend and maybe one day love. I achieved my GED at 19, and started college courses to receive degrees that interested me most. I'm gifted at drawing, writing poetry and spiritual articles. I like to read urban, romance and spiritual novels. I'm a fan of many music genres. Write me soon?

In a surprise decision, Caddo District Judge Katherine Dorroh took Brandy off death row on August 17, 2016. She is now serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

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Robert Coleman got good news from the Louisiana Supreme Court on November 2, 2007. The State Supreme Court granted Robert a new trial because a black juror was excluded from his jury.

Lea Hall from the Caddo Parish District Attorney’s Office told the Shreveport Times, “We totally disagree with the ruling. Our motivation was not based on race and it comes as quite a shock. I believe, with respect to the blacks who were cut from the jury pool, we didn’t cut all of those who were eliminated. The defense did cut some as well.”

The second trial began over four years later in January 2012. By then the crime was over nine years old. The Assistant District Attorney trying the case was First Assistant Dale Cox, a veteran of the courtroom. The presiding judge was Mike Pittman, himself a former assistant district attorney. Three of the original witnesses were absent at the retrial: Caddo Coroner Dr. George McCormick, Shreveport Fire Department Chief Tommy Adams, and Alice Brandon passed away since the first trial.

The jury, which was loaded with women, heard much of the same testimony the former jury heard. They saw photos from an ATM machine of Brandy and Robert attempting to use Julian Brandon’s ATM card. They heard testimony from Collies Sharpes, Coleman’s former cellmate that, if possible, was more damning than his original testimony.

But Coleman’s new defense team from Baton Rouge refused to give up without a fight. Their strategy was the same as Coleman’s first team. According to KSLA Channel 12, “Defense attorney Bruce Unangst told the jury on Monday, ‘Robert Coleman has never been in Julian Brandon's house. Not on January 1st, 2003. Not since then. Not ever.’ In his opening statements, Unangst said that Alice

Brandon identified her attackers to the EMS responders on the day of the attack as 'two white people' when they revived her, and that Coleman's DNA was never found at the house. Unangst says it was Holmes' brother... who was 15 at the time, who joined Brandy Holmes in the armed robbery and brutal attack in the Brandon home."

The defense got some assistance from Bobby Evans, Coleman's former cellmate who testified against him in his first trial. "Evans refused to identify Coleman in the courtroom or directly answer questions from prosecutor Dale Cox, telling the court, 'I asked the DA to let me alone and just let me do my time. I got stuff of my own to worry about.'" (From KSLA) Cox was able to overcome Evan's resistance by having him read a copy of the transcript from his testimony in the first trial after threatening him with perjury.

The defense called Robert Coleman's brother to the stand. He testified that a cut on his brother's hand could not have come from the robbery because Robert injured his hand while working on a car in Mississippi before the crime ever took place. He also told the jury the bloody boots found on Robert were not his boots. His revelations came nine years after the murders.

Despite the best efforts of the defense, Robert Coleman was found guilty of first degree murder and sentenced to death for the second time. The only winner in his retrial was his high priced defense team.

In 2016, the Louisiana Supreme Court reversed Colman's death sentence; however, they affirmed his conviction, and he is serving a life sentence.

It's hard to get executed in Louisiana. Many experts believe Louisiana's ability to execute criminals convicted of capital crimes has been hamstrung due to the state's appeals process. For example, Shreveport serial killer Nathaniel Code killed eight people in 1984-85. In 1989 he was convicted for four of the murders and given the death penalty. Thirty years later, Code still sits on death row, thumbing his nose at justice.

Only one prisoner has been executed in Louisiana since 2002: Gerald Bordelon. Gerald was a two time sex offender who was convicted and sentenced to death for kidnapping, raping, and murdering his 12 year-old step daughter. But in the world of death row inmates, Bordelon was unusual. He felt responsible for his crimes and wanted to die. He decided to abandon his appeals and subject himself to lethal injection, but his lawyers wouldn't let him. He appealed to the Louisiana Supreme Court for his right to waive his appeals and won. He was executed in 2010. There are still executions in Louisiana but only for volunteers.

On January 8, 2019, I spoke to Brandy Holmes attorney, David McClatchey. We talked about Brandy's case and her fetal alcohol syndrome defense. David explained her condition and helped me understand it better. After spending time with him, I saw where he was coming from. He believed a person with that condition should not be executed. He may be right.

Not long ago, a life sentence in Louisiana was a life sentence, but that may be changing. As long as killers stay in jail for the rest of their lives, it is hard to insist on executing them, but if there is a chance that killers like Brandy and Robert could get out, the death penalty must be enforced.

Thanks to the men and women who dedicate their lives for the sake of justice. Without them, civilization could not exist.

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